U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Russia

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

The Russian Federation has an increasingly controlled political system featuring a strong presidency with a weak multiparty political system. The dominant pro-presidential United Russia party received more than two−thirds of the seats in the December 2007 State Duma elections and its candidate, Dmitriy Medvedev, received more than 70 percent of the vote in the March 2008 presidential elections. Both elections were marked by abuses of administrative resources and media bias**,** denial of registration of opposition parties and candidates, and ballot fraud. The concentration of power in the executive branch, a compliant State Duma, corruption in law enforcement, and harassment of some NGOs has eroded the government's accountability to its citizens. The overall human rights situation is poor, and the state itself engaged in some abuses and was ineffective at preventing others. The government's human rights record remained particularly poor in the North Caucasus where government security forces have been allegedly involved in unlawful killings, politically motivated abductions, and disappearances in Chechnya, Ingushetiya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus.

In the midst of a growing economy and the state's control over the political system, space for public criticism of the government is contracting. While civil society and state-sponsored watchdog organizations are generally able to operate, monitor developments, and speak out, there are notable exceptions, and the government restricted some NGOs through selective application of laws, tax auditing, and regulations that increased the administrative burden. Among specific areas of concern, security forces were alleged to have engaged with impunity in torture, abuse, unlawful killings, abductions, and disappearances. Despite government efforts to combat hazing in the armed forces, the widespread practice continued to result in severe injuries and deaths. Prison conditions were often harsh and frequently life threatening; law enforcement was often corrupt; and the executive branch allegedly exerted influence over judicial decisions in some high−profile cases. Media freedoms were weakened by government ownership and pressure, and unresolved killings of journalists and other violence promoted self-censorship among the media. Access to the internet is largely unfettered, but internet traffic is reportedly monitored by the government. Television, which remains the primary source of information for most Russians, is mostly controlled or strongly influenced by the state. Local governments tried to limit freedom of assembly, and police sometimes used violence to prevent groups from engaging in peaceful protest. There was government and societal discrimination as well as incidents of harassment and violence against religious and ethnic minorities, particularly by skinheads, nationalists, and right-wing extremists. There were some incidents of anti-Semitism. Violence against women and children, trafficking in persons, and instances of forced labor were also reported.

Part 2

U.S. government priorities for promoting human rights and democracy in Russia include encouragement of modern democratic political institutions, an active civil society, independent media, and the rule of law. Overall, the US aims to see Russia become a more democratic, vibrant, and stable geopolitical partner within the international community that increasingly moves toward a free-market democratic system built on checks and balances, and acts as a strong and effective partner in areas of common interest**.** Despite the challenges in the current atmosphere, there is room to encourage and support democracy and civil society. The U.S. can and will continue to support growing NGO professionalism and policy advocacy, civic education and exchanges, respect for the rule of law, and human rights. At the regional level in particular, opportunities exist to encourage civil society activism and improved local self-governance. We seek, where appropriate, to strengthen and encourage the Russian government's own support for the development of civil society and respect for the rule of law. We support fundamental human rights, democratic values, principles, and practices. To strengthen fundamental civil liberties, and protect associations dedicated to these issues, and help society defend the rights of citizens, the U.S. supports programs to educate the public about basic rights and bolster human rights and watchdog organizations—especially while domestic financial support for these organizations remains limited. U.S. programs support efforts to strengthen independent regional media and networks of professional journalists. Programs help NGOs to become better advocates for citizens' interests, more effective interlocutors with government, and stronger sources of expertise for the public and authorities.

Russia's efforts to restrict the exercise of fundamental freedoms, in particular the activities of civil society groups and independent media, create a difficult atmosphere for U.S. government programs. Nonetheless, the U.S. will continue to support democratic reformers and human rights defenders, while also seeking opportunities to advance democratic practice and culture by working in cooperation, where U.S. goals are aligned, with national government and sub-national government authorities in those areas of common interest. These include programs aimed at improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of local governments, cooperating to prevent trafficking in persons, and enhancing other law enforcement endeavors. In other areas, however, foreign engagement is often viewed as interference and the Russian government itself is the main impediment. In these spheres, U.S. programs may have a more limited immediate effect, however it remains important to maintain support for the development of democratic institutions andpromote and advocate for fundamental freedoms, even where short term expectations for programmatic impact are modest. One example is the U.S. effort to strengthen the professionalism and responsiveness of political parties. Since prospects for political party development in the near term remain limited, programs in the region supporting civil society grassroots initiatives, which may lay the foundations for future political institution building,offer some longer-term possibilities.

Part 3

An important direct means of promoting human rights and democracy in the country is through sustained dialogue between the United States and the government, civil society, and independent media. U.S. officials meet regularly with representatives of the Russian government, media outlets, the religious community and civil society to convey U.S. interests, to promote and protect human rights and democratic norms, and to better understand how the motivations, actions, and results of government policy and societal developments affect the observance of human rights and strengthening of democratic institutions. The U.S. will also continue to rely on well-coordinated efforts to dissuade or discourage the government from enacting legislative or administrative restrictions on civil institutions or internationally recognized human rights that are under consideration.

The U.S. supports numerous programs designed to promote the rule of law and judicial independence, working with federal and local government partners in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, along with national and local bar associations and NGOs. These include legislative assistance projects in the areas of criminal procedure, trafficking in persons and victims' rights, as well as judicial exchange programs and training programs for prosecutors, defense lawyers and law enforcement agents. Central themes in all these programs include encouraging respect for judicial independence, encouraging adjudication of cases on the merits, supporting the jury system, rendering the legal system more transparent, expanding access to justice by helping citizens and NGOs to seek effective redress in the court system.

The Embassy implements a variety of technical assistance programs that support the development of the rule of law, civil society and NGOs, independent mass media, and human rights. U.S.-sponsored cooperation and exchange programs are long-term efforts to build trust and promote understanding of modern, independent, and accountable political and judicial institutions, to support democratic civic voices. The U.S. supports human rights and citizen watchdog groups, as well as promotes the development of domestic philanthropy to encourage the indigenous, long-term realization of these goals. We also support technical assistance and exchange programs, some of which complement to government projects, by working with citizens, NGOs, and local government to help make government more responsive to public needs and demands. U.S. programs promote public access to policymaking and quality public services, two components of an accountable and effective government. For

example, the Embassy supports the production of issue-based analysis and training for NGOs and regional coalitions to improve effectiveness of governance. U.S. programs also link Russian judicial, legal and media professionals with their U.S. and international counterparts to work in partnership to improve their professionalism and independence and promotion of the highest international standards.

Part 4

Additional U.S. efforts that support democracy and human rights goals include engaging with civic organizations that represent both the majority of the Russian population and those that protect marginalized groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, migrant communities, and persons with disabilities. The U.S. promotes legislative reforms in the criminal justice sector in the areas of trafficking in persons and victim assistance. U.S. funding provides 30-40 small grants annually to Russian NGOs working throughout the country to strengthen civil society and encourage ordinary citizens to take an active role in their communities. Recent examples of such grants include support for a public awareness campaign to assist persons with disabilities; improving the legal rights of guest workers; a project to support women's rights in Muslim areas of the Caucasus; and assistance to local organizations to combat trafficking in persons.

Direct outreach to Russian citizens is an important aspect of the U.S. Government's activities to promote human rights and democracy. This is accomplished through public affairs programming and visitor and exchange programs. The U.S. publicizes information about the American system of democracy through the Embassy web page, press releases, interviews with the mass media, and in special invitational events. Academic exchange and visitor programs are part of a long-term effort to ensure that young, well-educated Russians have first-hand knowledge of the United States and its open society and democratic institutions. During the 2006-2007 academic year, 649 Russian students and scholars participated in 17 academic exchange programs in the United States. During 2008, the U.S. plans to include more than 300 participants in international visitor and leadership programs, compared to 175 in 2007. A summer work/travel Program gives more than 30,000 students from all over Russia the opportunity to experience American democracy first-hand each year.

The U.S. government supports Russia's integration in multilateral organizations, such as the WTO and OECD, which will promote rule of law, enhanced corporate and democratic governance, and transparency, and the push for greater adherence to international norms of democratic governance. The U.S. supported several anticorruption and corporate civil responsibility programs; such programs create a culture of demand for good governance and an enabling environment for the better protection of human rights.

BACK TO TOP

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